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*A Supplication for the Beggars: The Arguments of Simon Fish and the Cultural
Relevance of his Writing in Sixteenth Century England*

The toppling of the political and societal power of the Catholic Church in sixteenth century England was an evolving and complex process that occurred gradually through the sixteenth and early seventeenth century. The shift of power away from the Catholic Church did not occur solely as a result of the rise of Protestantism nor was it an entirely political move. The process of change involved numerous intertwining elements. The political ramifications of such a monumental change would prove a temptation for any power-grasping monarch. This was the situation for Simon Fish and King Henry VIII from 1525-1540. While scholars today quarrel about the true motivations of King Henry VIII, his decision to split from Rome was an excellent strategic move politically. The English monarch could not exercise his full power in England unless he severed the English ties to Rome, since the church held such a significant amount of power in England (Scarbrick 248). For King Henry VIII to wield any power over England, ridding himself of Roman authority proved the ideal way to establishing his authority in England. After Henry severed the Roman ties, he could far more easily weaken the English church. These political changes provided the ideal gateway for protestant teachings to transform the societal landscape. New ideas filled the country. Writers and thinkers defined the problems facing England. Among those advocating change was Simon Fish.

Simon Fish wrote *A Supplication for the Beggars* in a politically charged atmosphere about the year 1530. He dedicates *A Supplication for the Beggars* to the king, “To the king ovre souereygne lorde” (Fish). Simon Fish’s historic *A Supplication for the Beggars* represents people who resented the idleness, power, land, population, and wealth of the clergy. This pamphlet highlighted the political, societal, and economic challenges prevalent during the early to mid-1500s. These arguments may have contributed to King Henry VIII’s decision to close the monasteries in England. Historian J.J. Scarisbrick notes that there are two narratives alluding to the idea that King Henry VIII did, in fact, read *A Supplication for the Beggars*. This information suggests that the message of Fish could have influenced the king (Scarisbrick 247). Fish appealed directly to the King, yet his powerful appeal to common sense increased the accessibility of this work among the general population. Despite some factual misinformation in his publication, his highly-emotional appeal to justice brought to light various important issues in mid-sixteenth century England which caused this work to be of significant literary, and historical, value.

Purpose of This Paper

Simon Fish desired reform. He passionately conveyed the issues he believed undermined English culture and fervently embarked on an intellectual quest to find tangible solutions. Fish highlighted five main problems with the clergy. Simon Fish’s major frustrations with the church concern the idleness of the clergy, the incredible power of the church, the ownership of church property, the population growth of religious clergy members, and the wealth of the church. The issues that Simon Fish highlighted were among the issues circulating during the mid-1500s that perhaps contributed to Henry the VIII’s decision to close the monasteries, just years following the publication of this pamphlet.

The Curse of Idleness

Simon Fish's most passionate plea concerns the problem of idleness among Catholic leaders in England. Fish laments, "these greedy sort of sturdy idell holy theues with these yerely exactions that they take of the people" (Fish). This is not a unique complaint, for many other reformers and early Protestants shared this frustration. Fish appealed to the senses of the common working man who frequently relinquished his hard-earned money to the church. Historian Richard Marius notes that, for Fish, envisioning an England where virtuous people thrived and could find work was essential. Fish believed that such a considerable amount of money went to the clergy that there was not sufficient money left to pay the working people. England could not thrive while the church took so much from the people. A powerful England came from "the energy of its united inhabitants, performing useful labor and growing in virtue" (Marius 353). Observing the surrounding society, Fish abhorred the idea that the clergy received significant funds from the people yet lived lives of idle ease. According to a document contemporary of Simon Fish's *Supplication* entitled "Visitations in the Diocese of Lincoln, 1517-1531" written by A.H. Thompson, printed in the *English Historical Documents 1485-1558* and edited by historian C.H. Williams, the monks in a large English monastery gambled frequently. Monks were also known to place bets by swearing an oath to "the body of Our Lord" (Thompson 766). Confirming Fish, Thompson also mentions that monks spent considerable time hunting and engaging in other sports inappropriate for church leaders (Thompson 764). To Fish, such idleness was a cruel response of clergy to the high-calling and purpose of their life's work. Fish appears justified in his complaint against the idle clergy. To be idle in a vocation of service was wrong to the eyes of the early protestant reformers, including Fish.

The Quest for Power

Simon Fish also highlights the increasing control of land and the corresponding expansion of power within the church. He proclaimed the startling realization that even if the king made laws against the church, the clergy could easily resist since they held the power of the people, and thus the country.

“whate remedy: make lawes ageynst them. I am yn doubt whether ye be able: Are they not stronger in your owne parliament house then your silfe? whate a nombre of Bissshopes, abbotes, and priours are lordes of your parliament? are not all the lerned men in your realme in fee with them to speake yn your parliament house for them ageinst your crowne, dignitie, and comon welth of your realme a fewe of youre owne lerned counsell onely excepted? whate lawe can be made ageinst them that may be aduaylable?” (Fish).

This argument is central to the message of Simon Fish. Historian Rainer Pineas writes that reducing the control of the church was at the forefront of Fish’s reasons for writing the *A Supplication for the Beggars*. Fish believed the power through money earned by the church was illegitimate because the church had grown wealthy by perpetuating the idea of purgatory. The church required lay people to offer payment so that their acquaintances and loved ones might not suffer purgatory indefinitely. According to Pineas, Fish believed purgatory did not exist (Pineas 153). Fish writes concerning purgatory:

“Lyke wyse saie they of all the hole sort of the spirituelte that if they will not pray for no man but for them that gyue them money they are tyrauntes and lakke charite, and suffer those soules to be punisshed and payned vncheritably for lacke of theyre prayers. These sort of folkes they call heretikes, these they burne, these they rage ageinst, put to

open shame and make them bere fagottes. But whether they be heretikes or no, well I wote that this purgatory and the Popes pardons is all the cause of translacion of your kingdome so fast into their hondes wherfore it is manifest it can not be of christ, for he gaue more to the temporall kingdome, he hym silfe paid tribute to Cesar he toke nothing from hym but taught that the highe powers shulde be always obei[e]d ye[a] he him silf (although he were most fre lorde of all and innocent) was obedient vnto the highe powers vnto deth...” (Fish).

Fish discusses, at length, about the hypocrisy, false teachings, and the Catholic Church’s illegitimate claims to authority. However his key issue revolved around the idea that the church was too powerful and that this power must be weakened. The doctrine of purgatory significantly added to the power of the church. Over the years, the gradual increase in power by the church created an, in essence, empire that wielded power rivaling that of the king, to Fish, this was unacceptable.

The Increasing Control of Land

In terms of land, Fish argued that the church, as of the time he wrote, owned one-third of the land in England. This statistic seems outrageously high, especially considering the class system in place in sixteenth century England. Fish wrote, “these locusts own also one third of the land” (Fish). Although he was not a statistician or trained historian, historians have now traced the numbers and compared this information with other sources. This statistic, in fact, appears to be accurate. Historian Pineas states that scholars today agree that one-third of English land at the time of the publication was owned by the church (Pineas 157).

Nevertheless, Fish exaggerates the meaning of these numbers. While owning one third of the land may at first glance seem like the owner must be a high grand power, estate management practices common to monasteries at the time offer a contradicting insight. In his book *English Monastic Finances in the Later Middle Ages*, historian Robert Snape notes that practices in estate management altered significantly during the fourteenth century. This is most likely due to the loss of population during the Black Death. Thereafter the church leased considerable portions of church lands to outside farmers. By the fifteenth century, a significant portion of the land was no longer under the direct authority of the clergy (Snape 11). Although ownership could be linked to the monks, they actually retained little control of the land they owned. The changes in management of church owned estates would certainly affect the claims Simon Fish makes in regard to land owned by the clergy. Simon Fish also argues that the king lacked power to diminish any authority of the clergy; this idea, however appears to be misguided. Following the death of an abbot, the King could partake in revenues of the abbey and seize the property of the former abbot, if the land was owned personally by the abbot. However, the remaining members of the church could not have their income revoked by the King (Snape 28). Clearly, the argument concerning land ownership and control by the clergy is not as convincing as in a first glance. Additionally, Fish appears to believe that when people donated land to the church following death, this land was then used solely to expand the wealth of the church. While Fish's view is often true, the poor received a proportion of the value of the assets given to the church (Snape 115). Although Fish's argument is a compelling one he did not explain some lay control of some church lands and thus weakened his factual claims of argument against the "land grab" England experienced by the church. Rhetorically, however, his claim was persuasive.

A Growing Population

In *A Supplication for The Beggars*, Simon Fish finds a rather peculiar argument against the powers of the Catholic Church in regard to the population of the church. He argued that the church was stealing the young people of England and makes highly exaggerated claims in regard to this proposition. Fish claims that the population of the clergy was one in four hundred; this has been deemed entirely incorrect (Pineas 157). Of all of his concerns regarding the church, this claim was the weakest. This argument best represents the purpose and nature of Simon Fish in his writing. Fish relies more on emotional appeal rather than on firmly-rooted facts and statistics. The argument that the church is stealing members of the population and that the celibacy of clergy will result in the demise in population growth is not scientifically or factually valid given the proportion of population to clergy and so forth. While accurate data from this time period can be difficult to find regarding exact numbers, thinking through this issue logically, it becomes clear that this argument is present in his argument to convey an idea rather than prove the existence and solution of a real, factually proved issue.

The Excess in Wealth

Arguably the most well-known argument against the Catholic Church, Simon Fish also criticized the wealth of the Catholic Church in England. Simon Fish highlighted the scope and depth of the various activities the Catholic Church performed solely in the pursuit of wealth,

“whate money pull they yn by probates of testamentes, priuy tithes, and by mennes offeringes to theyre pilgrimages, and at theyre first masses? Euery man and childe that is buried must pay sum what for masses and diriges to be song for him or elles they will accuse the de[a]des frendes and executours of heresie. whate money get they by mortuaries, by hearing of confessions (and yet

they wil kepe therof no counceyle) by halowing of churches altares
 superaltares chapelles and belles, by cursing of men and absolving them
 agein for money? what a multitude of money gather the pardoners in a yere?
 Howe moche money get the Somners by extorcion yn a yere, by assityng the
 people to the commissaries court and afterward releasing th[e] apparaunce
 for money ... They sey also that if there were a purgatory And also if that the pope with
 his pardons for money may deliuer one soule thens” as well as “they will not pray for no
 man but for them that gyue them money” (Fish)

Simon Fish noted the surreptitious way the church handled and obtained money from the parishioners. He disapproved of these methods. Buying services from the church, he believed, was an unfaithful expression of religion. Fish effectively linked money to power, and noted how King Henry would be unable to limit the power of the clergy through legislation as the Church held the money, and thus the power. “Whate lawe can be made so stronge ageinst them that they other with money or elles with other policy will not breake and set at nought?” (Fish). Here, Fish effectively uses persuasion, noting the reaction of the King, who most likely finds his self-esteem through power, yet also advocates for the protestant argument against the excessive wealth of the church. Expertly written, Fish’s narrative promoted the self-interest of the king, while still advocating the Protestant movement. Fish excellently played on the king’s fears. Wealth and power were effective incentives for the king to curb the wealth and power of the church (Chaudhury 30). Thus Fish’s arguments could grasp the approval of the king.

However, despite these claims, Fish does not take into account the differences of wealth among the clergy. Some monks in small villages received just five pounds per year while others received annual incomes of 3,500 pounds per year. To classify all monks as belonging to the

same social class is erroneous. Monks belonged to a wide range of classes during this time period (Savine 266). All members of the clergy did not experience the vast wealth espoused by Simon Fish and his contemporaries. On the contrary, many were poor. By the 1500s, parliament had already begun limiting the salaries of clergy, an action which resulted in parishioners' complaining that clergy were unable to support the upkeep of their parishes. Some smaller parishes even had to limit charity work because of the reduced salaries (Snape 83). Although many upper ranking members of the clergy lived with the benefits of court life, the majority of the clergy lived on meager sums. While some may think that the church gave preference to the wealthy members of their parish, Savine writes that many monks offered their services to anyone of any social rank that needed their help, without discrimination (Savine 266). While instances of wealth and snobbery certainly existed, discrimination and exploitation may have been rarer than commonly believed. Knowing the benefits and perks of wealthy living, the church maintained close connection with the top ranking members of society yet the church still stressed the importance of humble living and served the common people (Savine 267). The Catholic Church attempted to balance a fine line between realizing its love of wealth yet also fulfilling its mission of serving the community. As in any large organization, the temptation of leaders to become corrupt increased as the power of the church increased. Greed led to feelings of contempt from people such as Simon Fish. In the letter for the Appointment of Commissioners for the examination of the monasteries in 1536, the king made an order that the belongings of the monasteries should be sold and that any items of value should be placed in the Tower of London for safekeeping (Thompson 771). Yet with the closing of the monasteries, the wealth was transferred to noble families under the control of the king, ready for the benefits of this new wealth and corresponding power. Fish's five main arguments pertained to the idleness of the

church, the quest for power, property ownership, population of the clergy, and lastly the wealth. Through these arguments he effectively ties together the main points of contention reformers had in regard to the Catholic Church.

Change in England

The arguments presented by Fish were both political and religious in nature. Fish knew that in order to experience religious change, he must convince the political power of the day in order to gain political support. *A Supplication for the Beggars* adds to a growing movement during his day to reform the church. Other writers argued similar sentiments, for instance, Hugh Latimer writes in “The Sermon of the Plough” that, “ye that be prelates, look well to your office; for right prelating is busy labouring, and not lording. Therefore preach and teach, and let your plough be doing. Ye lords, I say, that live like loiterers, look well to your office; the plough is your office and charge” (Latimer). Similarly, in agreement with Fish, an argument is presented by Parliament in “The Supplication of the Commons against the Ordinaries” published in 1532, which says, “the clergy...have made and daily make divers fashion of laws and ordinances concerning temporal things: and some of them most repugnant to the laws and statutes of your realm...” (Thompson 733). Change was about to happen.

In *The Historical Journal*, historian R.W. Hoyle notes the timing of King Henry VIII’s decision to close the monasteries and highlights the fact that throughout the 1520s to early 1530s closing the monasteries was not yet part of the Parliament debate; however just a few short years later, between 1536 and 1540, the king ordered the closing of the monasteries and took control over church land (Hoyle 275). The date of publication for Simon Fish’s pamphlet was 1530, just years before this grand political move by the king. Hoyle notes that the initial initiative for

“clerical disendowment” first appeared before Parliament in 1534 (Hoyle 294). After the first act to close the monasteries in 1536, by the summer and fall of that year, smaller monasteries around the country were already shut down (Bernard 400).

After the smaller houses were shut down, government officials began to review their process and around 1537, Henry along with his advisors decided to completely shut down all remaining open monasteries. In the *Second Act for the Dissolution of the Monasteries, 1539* it states,

“Be it therefore enacted ... that the king our sovereign lord shall have, hold, possess, and enjoy to him ... all and singular such late monasteries ... and other religious and ecclesiastical houses and places ... which since the said fourth day of February the 27th year in the reign of our said sovereign lord, have been dissolved, suppressed, renounced, relinquished...” (Second act for the Dissolution of the Monasteries, 1539 774).

By 1539, King Henry VIII was whole-heartedly determined to close all remaining monasteries. In the time leading up the final closure of the monasteries, there were approximately 850 monasteries still operating (Lockyer 71). The closure of English monasteries was gradual, beginning in 1536 and ending in 1540. When the final act for the closure of all remaining monasteries still open was passed in 1539, the last of the monasteries were closed. “On 23 March 1540 the last survivor, Waltham Abbey made its surrender” (Dickens 143). Every monastery in England had been shut down by 1540 (Bernard 404). Following the closure of the monasteries, the power, land, idleness, recruiting of clergy, and wealth of the church were all severely diminished. Fish’s pamphlet was one of those advocating change. In less than a decade after the

publication of this pamphlet, the political tides forever changed the social fabric of religious life in England.

An Argument from Sir Thomas More

Soon after publication, the primary opponent of protestant reformer William Tyndale, Thomas More, the then Lord Chancellor of England, published a work contrary to Simon Fish's in an attempt to defend the church. His piece entitled the *Supplication of Souls* attempted to dispute the arguments made by Fish. While Fish's pamphlet was approximately sixteen pages, the response by Thomas More was over ten times as long. More devoted a considerable portion of his argument devoted to purgatory as he fiercely defended this essential Catholic belief (Frank Manley lxviii). Contrary to Fish, Thomas More was a staunch supporter of the Catholic Church. He fiercely believed and defended its many beliefs. Disbelieving the doctrine of purgatory frightened More as he feared the implications this could have on the eternal life of the soul and thus embarked on a crusade to defend this important Catholic doctrine (Frank Manley lxix). Because Simon Fish attacked the doctrine of purgatory, More defended this fundamental Catholic doctrine.

While Simon Fish's *Supplication of the Beggars* attempted to persuade, from the perspective of those being ignored in society in contrast with the wealth and splendor of the church, More presents his case from the perspective of those souls in purgatory who beg for their release from the fire. To validate his argument and display his authority, More stated that the King does not support the Lutheran movement. More urged the king to deeply consider the fact that heretics are behind this movement, even though additional wealth and power would be tempting for the power-hungry monarch (Frank Manley lxix). Change and division of social

norms in England frightened More. He would do anything necessary to preserve the unity of his beloved institution Catholic church.

Structure of *A Supplication for the Beggars*

Simon Fish organized the writing of *A Supplication for the Beggars* in an order that afforded him the best way to convey his grievances. Fish used highly persuasive language and succinctly conveyed his argument in just under 5,000 words. He used effective rhetorical strategies to gain support from the English people in protest to the clergy (Schuster 1190). This structure, to him, came in the form of a highly emotionally charged and sequential argument designed to ignite change in England. He began his plea by progressing straight to the heart of his argument. He begins with an analogy, comparing the priests to “hidous montres” and “foule vnhappy sorte of lepres” as he compared the clergy to what he considered the lowest souls of humanity in his day. He transitioned to discussing the idleness and illegitimacy of the wealth earned by the clergy and contrasted this wealth with the poverty of the people. This argument flowed smoothly into his argument concerning the obedience required of the people and then the supposed immorality of the clergy. His argument became increasingly grand in scale as he discussed the overarching power contained by the church and described how powerless the political forces of the day would be against the church. In contrast with Sir Thomas More, Simon Fish does not utilize dialogue in his pamphlet and relies heavily on concise and compelling arguments to propel his case forward. He is also careful not to use language which suggests scornful disdain of his opposition. His argument continued into issues concerning population and then suggested to readers what must be done. He concluded with the Latin words in tune with his

dedication and ultimate purpose of writing, “Domine saluum fac regem” or “O Lord, Saving the King” a signal of his purpose of writing and desire for real change to happen in society. It was his ultimate appeal to political authority in his day. This pamphlet was designed to evoke emotion in the readers and was written in a style that conveyed urgency. Without precise statistical knowledge, Fish focused on emotional interest. Throughout *A Supplication for the Beggars*, Fish does not appeal to the rationality of his readers but rather on their emotions. His masterful, skilled mind employed the most effective tool he had to persuade his audience to join his crusade (Chaudhury 35). Throughout *The Supplicaiton of Beggars*, this conveyance of urgency and emotionalism is prevalent throughout—an effective tool used by Fish to propel his issues forward. The value of this writing lies in its emotional and effective conveyance of grievances from a man who eloquently stated his grievances against the Roman church.

The Person of Simon Fish

While few biographical facts about Simon Fish exist, insights can be gleaned from his writing about his personality. Simon Fish appeared to have possessed a character of passion and incredible wit, as evidenced by his intensely effective appeal to action. Simon Fish found disparities between how he believed the church should act and how it acted in practice. Fish wrote of current, debatable issues in his time that many well-read English could agree with, for many people during this time already believed that English law and culture was undermined by the church leaders. In this respect, Fish was a voice for his people more than a great religious reformer, for the arguments he held were well-known at the time of publication thus diminishing idea that he was a heretic (Marius 351). Unlike well-known protestant reformers like Martin Luther or William Tyndale, Simon Fish was not remarkably opposed to the continuance of the Catholic Church in England. Throughout this pamphlet it is apparent that Fish did not deeply

concern himself with challenging theological issues; the only doctrinal issue he would change is purgatory (Marius 354). He desired that the Catholic Church would fix mistaken economic practices and then move forward. The decision to publish this article was one of fearless audacity. Because the government controlled the press, publishing a document of this nature came with consequences. “By Foxe’s account, Henry was enthusiastic...Fish fled across the seas, but when More was Lord Chancellor, he returned in secret and hid in London...Henry sought him out about 1530...Fish was invited to Henry’s chambers, and Henry even took him on a hunt...Foxe also says that the king ordered More to leave Fish alone...” (Foxe qtd. in Marius 354). Fish took a risk in writing and publishing this pamphlet. His ability to argue in such a persuasive way is a testament to his intelligent mind and critical thinking skills.

Closing Thoughts

A highly persuasive and skilled writer, Simon Fish wrote *A Supplication for the Beggars* with the audaciousness of a war hero and the conviction of a saint. His earnest plea for justice resonated through every word of his well-thought out argument. The uniqueness of his writing appeared through Fish’s highly persuasive, emotional, and empathic appeal that captured the heart of his powerful message. Simon Fish used arguments to suit his needs as he effectively skimmed the surface of issues not supportive of his desired message. A man of apparent passion and belief, he desired real change in his nation. To this effect, he wrote about the common and important arguments of his day. Because of this, his voice was among those that may have influenced the closure of the monasteries by King Henry VIII. Simon Fish embarked on a dangerous, risky feat, in asserting his beliefs. This pamphlet is therefore an important document in this history of the church, and thus of England.

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